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The Kids on the Roof

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The Kids on the Roof

More than one neighbor might have seen the boy putting his bare foot out the high window and onto the steep roof of the old Skates house, holding with both hands, framing his resolve. Irregularities stood out like stickweeds in that smooth neighborhood, and anyone's excess was everyone's concern. But as Randy watched from his bay window across the street he knew also the weakness of habit: on Sunday afternoon they didn't expect the roofs to open for business or pleasure, and it was quite possible that one, and only one, saw through the long nap of August.

As the boy leaned farther forward his shadow became a girl standing behind him, the same height or slightly taller, her hands on his waist. The children played in the fenced side yard of that high corner house while their parents worked odd shifts at the town's only mall. Their name was Sloane, or something like. During the two years they'd lived in the Skates house, Randy had watched the mother and father leaving separately and returning separately to the dirty white garage that fronted on his street, parking the rusty Buick off one edge of the driveway so the little foreign car could get through, and letting their grass go to seed. Now the boy tried to let go of the frame, his foot becoming a bird's head that stretches where the body can't. For a moment the sunbleached roof seemed so safe, so gradual and intact, that no one with his parents gone and only a few days of summer vacation left could resist. Then he shrank back inside, joining his shadow, and Margo broke the long silence.

"I think it's significant that we no longer have taxi service."

She lay on her back on the floor, the carpeted floor, her head under one straight-backed chair and her feet under another. A narrow trench of flesh ran between the sweat shirt and jeans she'd worn for eight straight days, including three hours each night lying on top of the covers with her hands cupped to catch whatever came down while her eyes were closed.

"We don't need a taxi," he told her. "Everybody in town has two cars, and nothing's more than a mile away. People give up and go out of business, it's not a conspiracy."

Carol leaned forward again on the sofa, uncrossing long legs. "What Margo means is that communications generally are breaking down. You know, the whole network. That's why it's necessary to have radios on."

"We don't need a translator either," Randy said. Below Carol's short dress her knees were symmetrical. Each was highlighted on its smooth cap by the sun back of him, back of his window seat. Even her hair hung the same on both sides, gliding in over brown shoulders. Finished and cool. When she'd played college basketball, a star of sorts, it had been worth the price of two tickets to watch her lose that cool when she slipped or collided with others on the hardwood floor, and to know that not long afterward when he and Margo and Carol and whoever Carol was dating at the time went out for pizza, it would all be back in place, the bruises undetectable except in his imagination.

"Anyway," he dug in, "you're not translating, you're editorializing. The reason she needs radios blaring in every corner of the house isn't for news or weather, it's to drown out those other voices she can't control, the ones she thinks she hears."

"I need Carol," Margo said through the chair Randy had sat in the day before to do her chore, balancing the checking account. "I need my best friend, otherwise you don't hear me."

"I need her too, otherwise it's all bananas. What I don't need is a translator." He turned back toward the Skates house where the girl had stepped out of the window midway up the roof, bracing herself with one sneakered foot and reaching above her for a rusty ventilator pipe. A rope was tied around her waist, and the boy held the other end just inside the window, playing it out and keeping it tight. Had she fallen, she would have gone at least to the rain gutter—at least that far, assuming that the boy's arms were strong, that the roof held, that the gutter itself held. Three families had lived in the old house since the Skates, but none of them was memorable, none had succeeded in changing its name.

Now at the very top of that roof which slanted upward at a murderous angle, Randy saw a fallen cross flashing in the sun, a plane signaling that it had just crash-landed. Not the flimsy stylized sort of toy propelled by rubber bands but a real model a foot and a half long, nose up from trying to clear the bright shingles.

"You know, Randy, all of us have a hearing problem at times. It's only human," Carol said, forgiving him again. The way she pronounced "human" made it sound sodden and worm-ridden, like composted soil. He thought of her studious, bearded husband, an entomologist who hadn't known her in college, who'd seen her games only in old clippings and glossy yearbooks.

"I hear fine."

"You think you hear, but your body gives you away. There you are looking out the window. You're not even with us."

"I suppose *she's* with us." He pointed at Margo's midsection, at the trench which ran perpendicular to her white arms, the far one of which was bandaged against a long glass cut she'd given herself.

Carol was marvelously patient. "Margo's with us more than it seems. Right now she's trying to focus. She's screening out sight so she can listen. She's open, now, to real communication."

"He's blind in one eye and deaf in the other," Margo said.

"That's really clear." Randy wagged his head at Carol in her pale green sundress and wondered if in her present role as counselor she even remembered their brief affair four years ago, their three evenings in Margo's bed while Margo stayed with her dying father. Now Margo had gone away again, out of focus as Carol would say, and he imagined the sundress covering the nightstand and the alarm clock, her symmetry dropping down over her feet.

"Clear as the clap of a bell," Margo was singing over and over, and for the first time her navel popped up into view, brown on white, like a horsefly. She had worn the same clothes for eight days and begun to smell, but she no longer went around town tearing down political posters or danced in her pajamas in the vegetable garden.

Now he didn't need to turn to see the girl with her foot on the rusted pipe and her fingers reaching for the plane's tail. It was still far beyond her, and there were no more footholds. She looked back at the boy who might have reminded her how close they were to the start of school.

"The issue is treatment," Randy said. "If you want to function as a mediator you'd better get that through to her. What do I care if she wears out a radio or two? The cigarette burns can be fixed. I'm not fussy about housekeeping. I don't even care about the friends we've lost."

"No, you wouldn't care about friends," Margo said.

"I don't care about them primarily. Don't take words out of my mouth. Primarily, your health is the issue. If you refuse treatment, there are other options."

"Options? Is that a threat? Is my own husband threatening me?"

He sighed at the chair that had become her head. "There are always options. That's a statement of fact. If fact threatens you, I rest my case."

"Randy, do you see what you're doing? No wonder she's where she is."

"I really appreciate your ability to see both sides, Carol. Your compassion, your fairness. What am I in all of this, a shower curtain? Just because I'm still able to reason doesn't mean I don't hurt."

"You enjoy hurting. Margo doesn't."

She might have been referring to the time he'd told Margo about their three evenings in the sack. What happened wasn't even real, he'd said. It was like doing it with a picture from *Sports Illustrated*. Then don't think of this as real either, Margo had said leaving for her sister's in Des Moines. She wouldn't return his calls, and neither would Carol until he mailed her three single-edged razor blades. But the bug fancier never knew, and Carol and Margo went back to being the best of friends, and four good years passed.

Slanting with the roof, the girl had taken the rope from the boy and fastened a noose with his end while he tried to watch her around the corner, holding to his frame. She arched her arm but the rope glided over the top of the plane's fuselage and tail like a wind stream. As Randy watched, the only one watching their failures, the girl slipped a little getting the noose back and had to brace herself on the slope before she tried again. This time the pressure of the rope made the plane fall, turning around as it slid past the girl to the gutter below.

"What's out there that's so interesting?"

"It's another woman. I'm not satisfied with the two fates I've got, so I'm looking for another."

"Three fates, one for each nipple," Margo said.

The girl came down hugging the roof, her feet out like brakes, and the boy reached for her. She paused on the ledge, and with her free hand she seemed to wave like an aerialist who has reached her trapeze, then stepped inside.

"The issue, I said, is how we're going to live. It's a practical thing. We live in a close neighborhood with people who see more than they let on. I can't function with radios on all night, with someone telling me worms are flying in the basement and bats crawling in the attic."

"I never said that."

"You said that just last week. Carol is getting ready to tell me that worms aren't worms and bats aren't bats. But I don't care what they are, I can't deal with it. Coming in once a day to check things out is nice. I appreciate that, Carol, I really do. But living with it twenty four hours—that's something else."

Margo kicked over the chair with her bare feet and it bounced once on the carpet. Her face was still under the other chair. In case your ceiling falls, she'd said earlier.

"And the breakage. I can deal with that. I don't mind a cup here and there. It's what's behind that hurts. What isn't behind. There's no reason."

The girl hung out the window, the boy holding her waist. She was trying to lasso the plane in the gutter, but it was upside down and apparently at a bad angle. She leaned out as far as she dared, then pulled back inside. Carol had just said that reason depended on the way one looked at it. His eyes followed her legs to her ankles where the straps began like sentences against her skin. In college she'd had a man for each season, and all her men were accomplished in their disciplines and lovers of symmetry.

"No reason to anybody. You come in for two, three hours and it makes sense because you're seeing it like a movie, or a case in abnormal psychology. I live here, I'm the one has to get up at four in the morning to cut off the appliances. Move in for a week, then see what you say."

"If you move in you can sleep in the middle," Margo said. "We'd all like that. Randy could hug your back while I'm turning things on and I could hug your back while he's turning things off."

Carol put her finger to her mouth, as if Margo could see it. "Hush, Margo, that's all over."

"Maybe it isn't. Maybe that's the real thing with her, even now."

"You'd like it to be," Carol said. "Just a sexual problem. Something you can treat like a hangnail."

"What you don't know, Madame Translator, is that Margo and I are enjoying excellent sex. She's hotter in bed than she's ever been. On that score there are no complaints. We do it four times a day. Anywhere she catches me."

"Congratulations, I'm sure." Carol crossed her legs and looked away.

Margo was talking to herself and curling and uncurling her toes. The soles of her feet were as dirty as if she had been walking on roofs.

"Maybe if you two are doing so well I should just take off."

"No," they said, almost in unison, and Margo laughed. Randy said, "You see? Twelve years of marriage and you're the only thing we agree on." Margo kept on laughing, her toes jerking rapidly, the top of her stringy hair visible now. He buried his nose in it, in his mind.

At the Skates house, the boy took his turn hanging out the window, holding the frame with his hands and reaching down with bare toes. But the girl had disappeared, along with the rope, and the plane lay far below him. Even stretched out full length, he had no chance.

Margo pushed the chair away, looked hard at Randy and pulled it back over her face. "I wanted to see if you'd taken off your wig."

"What wig?"

"Your powdered wig. Your judgment wig. Your long white therapist's wig. Your condom."

"Sure. My condom."

"She just wants you to be more natural."

"Natural? Did you see her face?"

"If you loosen up she'll loosen up. You're part of her, Randy. You're like an iron rod she's bound to. She can't feel."

"My god." Out of the corner of his eye he had just seen the boy slip down the roof and grasp the gutter. He was hanging from the gutter now, thirty feet above the ground.

Carol bounced up and joined him, taking in the scene. "Why didn't you say something?" she jostled him getting to the hall, to the door. He watched her running across the street and into the fenced yard. A few neighbors appeared on small porches, or darkened close-cut lawns.

"Why did Carol leave, did you hurt her again?"

"There's a boy hanging off the roof of the Skates house. Don't let it bother you, it's just another happening in the outside world."

Carol was sprinting back like one running from contagion. "Help me get a mattress out," she said leading him through the hall.

They pulled the blanket and sheets off the queen-sized bed and got the mattress sideways into the hall, dragging it and knocking aslant a light fixture on the ceiling. At the door Randy saw that the boy had already fallen. "Stop pushing, he's down."

She left the mattress half in, half out, and ran across the street between stopped cars, her thin heels as solid as gym shoes. Randy pulled it back inside and it bent in the middle where he and Carol had lain for three short afternoons.

"Some excitement. You might want to look out and see what everyone else is seeing. A boy just fell off a roof, probably broke both his legs."

Through their front window he could see nothing but the tops of heads over the fence that had been built after the Skates had moved, and a few latecomers standing near the gate in shorts and sandals, or under the shade of the old elm that marked the corner of the lot. He couldn't distinguish Carol, though she usually stood out in crowds. She must have been kneeling inside, ministering. It came back to him that she took care of her three children every day, that she had already been two times a mother when they were fooling around in bed.

Margo had begun to cry softly, her midsection heaving in and out, her toes intertwining.

"That's good, you're finally having an appropriate response."

"You bastard."

"No, I mean it." He did mean it, but he dreaded her new mood more than he dreaded her irrational behavior that set him on edge. She was sobbing now, with high little sounds.

He looked at the plane still lying upside down in the gutter. A part of the wreck seemed to have come off and lay separately, just over the metal edge. Randy thought of the plane's tiny pilot. He wanted to go to the den closet for his binoculars, but he thought something might happen behind his back. Now he could almost make out the features. The helmeted head hung over and looked down at the ground a thousand feet below. The arm stuck out into space, or back through time. Randy remembered making model planes when he was in junior high school, gluing them together and painting the plastic parts. His mother hanging them from the ceiling with threads.

"I'm cold," Margo complained, sniffing.

From the couch where Carol had been sitting he brought an afghan Margo had made and spread it over her legs.

When he went back to the window the pilot, or the twig or crumpled leaf, was gone. He shivered and saw the green sundress coming back through browns and grays, Margo's knees untouched from contact with the ground.

She told him that the boy's sister had tried to catch him and broken his fall. They were both okay, only shaken up.

"Kids always come out alright," Randy said. "They bounce and roll. No big deal, it's still going to be the Skates house."

Carol was looking at Margo under the afghan and saying maybe she should go. Children to feed, a husband to reassure, all that. Outside, neighbors stood around the gate to the Skates yard and recalled harder summers, better times.

"We need to talk," Randy said.

Margo kicked the floor. "No more of your hateful options, I'd rather be beaten with a stick."

She began to cry again, and Carol started toward her. They heard the siren only a moment before the ambulance came around the corner of Clay. The sound got lower and slower as the white van stopped just past their window.

Randy turned. "I thought you said they were okay."

Carol shot her hand through her neat hair and he reached for her moment of anger and came up short.

She stood next to him at the window, not so much forgiving as ignoring. In her tight roles as counselor and neighborhood nurse she could toss off pain before it became pain. Randy hated himself for the way he'd admired her, still admired her.

Even without tilting his head he could smell the sun on her shoulders as they watched the white uniforms of the attendants showing between slats in the fence. He imagined wrapping up brother and sister and bundling them into the back of the ambulance

where, in parallel beds, they would ride east a ways and then north to the hospital. Or even further, escaping all the fenced yards and tailored lawns. But the attendants returned empty-handed.

As they closed the ambulance doors, the little red car bounced into the driveway and father and mother got out on opposite sides.

"About time," Carol sighed, rolling her eyes upward to dismiss all human folly. Her concern finished, she walked away from them as if she'd seen nothing, as if her cool performance had cancelled it all out, not only boy and girl and mother and father, but husband and wife. Randy hoped Margo had seen that look, Carol's look of boredom when the game was over.

On the roof's edge, unattended, the wings tilted away from the gutter and might have fallen without the fuselage that held things together by a ligament or two. The plane looked frail now, store-bought. After a few fall rains it would come loose, part by part, and wash down the Skates drainpipe.

Margo's fingers crawled out of the afghan and up the leg of the chair, spider-like. He intercepted them and held her hand until it hurt.

"Where do we go from now?" she asked.

Paul Witherington